

Strategic Planning Initiative

About Faculty & Staff Focus Groups Frequently Asked Questions

What is a focus group?

A *focus group* is one in which a trained discussion leader facilitates a dialogue among a small group of individuals to solicit in-depth, nuanced feedback on a single topic or a limited range of questions. Focus groups are not free-standing tools, but are used to amplify on and enrich data collected through research, interviews, and surveys. Such groups are generally between six and fifteen in number; their membership may be targeted to a specific category or demographic, or can be comprised of participants designed to provide a range of perspectives. Focus groups are most often one-time events, although on occasion a group may be reconvened after some time has passed to test whether the views originally offered have changed.

How will focus groups be used as part of the UMF strategic planning process?

For purposes of the UMF strategic planning process, focus groups will be used to delve more deeply into specific topics suggested by the research, individual interviews, and online surveys that have been conducted. While there may be some variation, it is anticipated that each focus group will have anywhere from six to ten participants, who will be brought together in a session lasting sixty to ninety minutes. Each focus group will be facilitated by a BRG consultant experienced in leading such sessions.

How will participants be assigned to focus groups?

While taking into consideration self-selected preferences, participants will be assigned to focus groups at-random. Every effort will be made, as far as is practical, to accommodate first choice preferences while also including a cross-section of stakeholders in each group. Anyone with an interest in participating will be assigned to a group. Given the number of people who have indicated their interest thus far, it is anticipated that there will be multiple sections for one or more of the groups.

What if someone is not assigned to their preferred focus group?

If someone is not assigned to their preferred focus group, there are multiple other ways to make their views known. They can participate in a survey, attend and speak at one of the larger group meetings such as the Strategic Planning Workshop being scheduled for November, call or email a member of the BRG team, or send along materials they deem relevant. Two important points are worth remembering: first, whichever focus group one is assigned to represents the chance to make a meaningful contribution to the strategic planning process; and second, whichever focus group one participates in, there are also several other ways in which ideas and views can be shared.

What topics will the focus groups address?

There are any number of topics that could be considered appropriate for consideration in a focus group as part of the UMF strategic planning process. However, practicality and the constraints of a tight schedule require targeting those topics which most critically require focus group consideration as part of the strategic planning process. Based on the frequency with which certain topics have been raised during interviews and group conversations, as reinforced by survey data and additional research, five key topics have been identified.

What will be the five focus group topics?

The five focus group topics will be: strengthening the University community; ensuring student engagement and success; fostering inclusion and diversity; promoting long-term growth and stability; and building foundational strength. Each of these topics will include exploration of multiple issues, as noted below. However, the focus group conversations will not be limited to those issues alone; one of the benefits of focus groups is that, properly facilitated, they become organic processes generating conversations that while unanticipated can be highly beneficial. The key: to avoid pursuit of a preordained outcome, cultivating instead a conversation that is nuanced and rich in productive detail.

What will be some of the issues considered under each focus group topic?

Each focus group topic area will include consideration of the issues noted below. But again, these lists of issues are intended to launch, not limit, the participants' exploration of the topics. A principal benefit of focus groups, is the serendipity they encourage: the unexpected avenue opened, the unanticipated insight gained.

The five focus group topics, and some of the issues that will be touched on in considering them, will be:

- ***Strengthening the UMF community.***

The boundaries of the UMF community run well beyond the campus confines. Strengthening the UMF community requires acts of town and gown partnership that enhance everyone involved. Among the issues to be considered are the University's brand identity, and how that identity is influenced and reinforced by its local, regional, and national relationships. A similar group of issues involves translating those relationships into action, such as UMF working with its immediate community and greater region to promote economic development.

- ***Student engagement and success.***

One finding that has already become indisputably clear in the process so far is that student engagement and success is the product of many different elements. Among them are recruitment, retention, advising, scheduling, experiential learning, on-campus life, career placement, and the post-graduation relationship to the University. Determining the right mix of these elements – as well as, most likely, others – will require clarity and discipline to ensure the what students get is the best possible experience, as most comprehensively defined.

- ***Diversity and inclusion.***

An inescapable truth of our world today – one becoming ever more pronounced – is that in every aspect of life diversity is becoming the rule and inclusion the necessity. For UMF, these two issues arise in multiple arenas: for example, the selection and retention of staff and faculty, the recruitment of students from a wider swath of demographics, and the steps needed to ensure equity in educational opportunities and outcomes. Thinking through how UMF not only promotes and benefits from greater diversity and inclusion is critical to the University's future. Perhaps even more important, however, will be to equip UMF students for a world where diversity is the reality and inclusion the rule.

- ***Long-term growth and stability.***

UMF has been in existence since 1864 – more than 150 years. Now the challenge commonly understood across the University community is how to ensure the institution continues and prospers in its second century. Many different factors will play into that task: sound financial management, collaborative and cooperative relationships across the University of Maine System, interdisciplinary education, an unrelenting focus on core strengths, creative focus on programmatic specializations that productively differentiate UMF, the proactive search for nontraditional students, and constant alertness to realities and trends that demand change in the education the University offers, and how

it is delivered. Ideally these factors will work in tandem; in reality, they will require constant balancing and calibration. How well UMF succeeds in making those calculations will determine the course and health of the University's future.

- ***Foundational strength.***

Before anything else, all four of the preceding challenges – strengthening the UMF community, ensuring student engagement and success, promoting diversity and inclusion, and building long-term growth and stability – require a strong foundation centered on the blocking and tackling essential to a well-functioning institution. The capacity for sustained growth, creative and adaptive change, and resiliency when challenged by an ever-more-rapidly evolving social, economic, and political world – all of these are prerequisites for success. Determining infrastructure and facility priorities, exploiting all the benefits of technology while avoiding its pitfalls, providing the opportunities for staff and faculty training and education that stimulate intellectual thought and professional growth, and instituting management systems that demand accountability for performance and gauge progress through objective measures – all of these can be elements that create the environment in which the potential of the University can be realized, and surpassed.